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SPEAKER'S CORNER

Is it time to abandon colour categories for ethnic groups?

The recently published questionnaire for the major test ahead of the 2011 population census for England and Wales disclosed new questions on national identity and languages, religion as asked in 2001, and minimal change to the ethnic group question: the movement of ''Chinese'' into the ''Asian or Asian British'' set, and the arrival of categories for ''Arab'' and ''Gypsy/Romany/Irish Traveller''.[1] By contrast, Scotland's April 2006 census test broke with tradition in abandoning the colour terms used in 1991 and 2001, with ''European'' replacing ''White'' and ''African or Caribbean'' replacing the label ''Black, Black Scottish or Black British''.[2]

Among the benefits for Scotland are ''Ethnic background or culture'' categories for all four UK home countries under ''European'' (against just one in England and Wales); three options for ''Arab'' (''Middle East'', ''North African'' and a free text ''Other''); and five options for ''African'' (''North…'', ''East…'', ''Southern…'', ''West…'' and ''Central African''), ''Caribbean'', and a free text ''Other'', all under the ''African or Caribbean'' banner. Whilst the substantial diversity of the sub-Saharan African origin population in England and Wales (numbering 480 000 in 2001) continues to be catered for by the single category ''Black or Black British: African'', Scotland—with around just 5120 ''Black Africans'' in 2001—affords multiple categories for this population. The 2011 census categories will serve the government till 2021, by which time ''Black Africans'' in Britain are projected to double their 2001 count.

Terms like ''White'' and ''Black'' had their origins in the census field trials of the 1980s, when the census agency took the view that to measure discrimination and disadvantage among groups who ''were clearly distinguishable from the indigenous population by the colour of their skins… it is most desirable that reliable information be obtained about Blacks and Asians''.[3] That such colour labels should continue to describe ethnic categories when the basis for these has shifted to prevailing self-understandings merits critical scrutiny. In Britain, there has been no exploratory research among large population-based samples of preferred ethnic/racial terminology of the kind undertaken in the US through the Current Population Survey (CPS).[4] The CPS and other surveys shows that ''Black'' outperforms or competes equally with ''African American''. Here, web-based measures of opinion provide indicative evidence that ''African British'' has greater saliency than terms incorporating ''Black''.[5] The privileging of cultural differences in the Scottish question invites debate and highlights the need for a more sustained investigation of what shapes the lines of identification for those captured by the ''Black'' and ''White'' pan-ethnicities.

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